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ABSTRACT

Decreasing numbers of peers in the lives of older adults give a special meaning to closeness in their sibling relationships. Interviews elicited perceptions of closeness from 30 adults. Content analyses revealed several patterns, i.e., participants perceived themselves as always having been close, as having grown more or less close over time, or as never having been close. Parental expectations for unity, absence of favoritism, and democratic child-rearing practices originated close sibling relationships. Family norms and interaction rituals, personal liking and respect, and positive consequences of critical incidents maintained closeness; negative effects of critical incidents and lack of contact reduced closeness. In old age, closeness was highly valued as a source of comfort and pride, while a lack of closeness was a source of pain and guilt. For a few subjects, closeness meant little; however, most subjects believed that closeness gained in meaning as siblings became uniquely able to support each other and to validate each others' memories and existence. (Author/NRB)

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Older Adults' Perceptions of Closeness in Sibling Relationships

Helgola G. Ross, Mary Jo Dalton, & Joel I. Milgram

A number of studies suggest that the frequency of social contact decreases with advancing age (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Lowenthal, 1964; Rosow, 1970). Yet, a place in the social milieu is of major importance to the well-being of the elderly. Supportive networks provided by social agencies can insure them such a place (Pilisuk & Minkler, 1980). But may not other forms of social interactions offer similar advantages? For example, Cumming & Schneider (1961) found that next to one's children, siblings are the most important relatives in the lives of older adults. Cicirelli (1979) and Clark & Anderson (1967) ascertained that frequency of interaction and feelings of closeness among elderly siblings make brothers and sisters important members of the elderly's social networks. In addition to frequency and regularity of social interactions, certain levels of intimacy appear to be sufficient, if not necessary, conditions to buttress the elderly against mal-adaptation (Blau, 1973; Powers & Bultena, 1976; Weiss, 1977). Social networks as well as intimacy are potentially available to the elderly in their sibling relationships. Both might be aspects of perceived closeness in these relationships.

Given the possible multidimensionality of the concept of closeness, and the present lack of knowledge about its meaning, it was of interest to study what closeness means to the elderly. Hence, it is the purpose of this paper to present findings on the meaning of closeness in the sibling relationships

of older adults--its perceived life-span patterns, the dynamics which originate and maintain it, and its special place in old age.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were thirty older individuals ranging in age from 55 to 93 years. They were recruited from a Methodist retirement home, and urban and suburban senior citizen centers. The number of males and females in the study, their breakdown by age ranges, number of siblings, and educational levels, are described in Table 1. All subjects were white and middle class. As Table 1 indicates, their educational level was relatively high.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

Subjects met in six small groups, each consisting of four to six individuals. Groups met for two and one half hours. Semi-structured interviews elicited the subjects' perceptions about their sibling relationships: their sense of closeness, rivalries, favoritism, critical incidents, and changes in relationships over time. All sessions were tape-recorded with the permission of the subjects who also completed demographic questionnaires providing information about themselves and their siblings. The group interviews were transcribed and content-analyzed for recurrent regularities in topics, themes, and patterns (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975), and for particularly salient events (Guba, 1978). The analysis reported here focussed on life-span

patterns of closeness and on the dynamics through which they originate and are maintained.

Results and Discussion

Life-Span Patterns of Closeness

Perceived Family Closeness. Several life-span patterns of perceived closeness were identified from the responses of the elderly subjects. Interestingly, most responded to the question of closeness in their sibling relationships first in terms of family closeness and insisted on putting it into the context of childhood. Of the thirty participants in the study, seventeen said that their families had always been close. Only three participants perceived their families as never having been close, and five felt that family closeness had changed through their lives. Table 2 shows these patterns for males and females combined since family closeness patterns did not differ for the two sexes.

Insert Table 2 about here

Almost invariably, being part of a close family meant viewing oneself as a member of a social unit. Strong beliefs in the value of unity were associated with a variety of behaviors that translated beliefs into actions. Particularly salient among these were parental expectations for family unity, democratic child-rearing practices, absence of favoritism, and modeling of acceptable social behaviors. These resulted in family interaction patterns which maintained family closeness throughout life. However, family unity

is not always a source of comfort and belongingness. It can also be a source of pressure to conform if a sibling's values, goals, or behaviors veer from the family norms. For example, a participant who perceived family closeness decreasing with respect to himself had been expected to sacrifice dreams of individual achievement, marriage and a family of his own in order to help support his many younger siblings. When, after much conflict, he decided to pursue his own goals, he had to sever ties with his family to do so. Such critical incidents can have negative consequences and decrease closeness, as in the example described above. They may also have positive consequences and increase closeness, as in the following example. One participant's siblings were physically separated from each other after the early death of their father. When mother remarried years later the siblings were reunited, if not physically then psychologically, as they banded together against the step-father.

Closeness can also fade away. Family closeness became largely irrelevant to a participant who had advanced in socio-economic status far above the family's level. Another subject had spent the greater part of her adult life abroad which resulted in increased reliance on her husband and little contact with siblings who had been close during childhood and adolescence. Upon her return to the U. S. she resumed the relationship with her siblings and grew especially close to a brother. He became her advisor and confidant after her husband's death.

Among those who perceived their families as never having been close

was a woman whose parents had always favored their two older sons over their daughter. When the parents died while she was in her teens, the much younger sister resented the control her older brothers exerted over her life as her guardians. In another case the sense of brother- and sisterhood which characterizes close families was absent from the start; closeness was neither valued nor practiced, and the siblings had to fend for themselves even when young.

The importance of the family is clearly demonstrated by the large number of references to kinship in an analysis of roles siblings perform for each other. References to a sibling as kin were twenty times as frequent as references to friend, surrogate parent , advisor, teacher, or model. It is difficult to escape the impression that perceiving one's family as being close is the normal state of affairs among these subjects. Its lack is usually ascribed to adverse circumstances or the consequences of critical incidents. When reporting lack of closeness, the subjects' explanations were factual, and voices were tinged with confusion and guilt. Close family relationships, on the other hand, were mentioned with pride and a sense of recognition that things were as they ought to be.

Perceived Sibling Closeness. Being part of a close family does not mean, however, that one feels close to all of its members. Many of the participants' brothers and sisters were not mentioned at all during the interviews. Instead, as Table 3 shows, thirteen respondents talked about their favorite brother or sister, or singled out one sister or brother as having always been close. Six

participants reported siblings to whom they had never been close. The predominant pattern, however, shows that closeness in sibling relationships changes over time. Increased feelings of closeness were reported in twenty-four instances, decreases only in five. Most of the increases are cross-sex, showing growth of closeness between brothers and sisters. Similarly, brothers' and sisters' feelings for each other decreased less frequently than in same-sex pairs. Similar cross-sex feelings of closeness have been reported by Cicirelli (1977). The concomitant less frequent increase and more frequent decrease between women seems contrary to the findings of Adams (1968), Cicirelli (1979), and Cumming & Schneider (1961).

Insert Table 3 about here

Effects of Social Norms and Cultural Contexts. The small number of participants made it impossible to determine statistical differences between data collected in various settings. However, the data suggested that quantitatively the perceived patterns may be influenced by the values, traditions, and religious preferences of the communities in which the participants grew up and with which they identified as adults. Qualitatively, the dynamics originating and maintaining closeness seemed less affected by the cultural and social context. The perceived determinants and factors which maintain closeness appear to be similar in different contexts, but the frequency with which they are reported may differ. Thus, the extent to which values and norms of childhood result in different family traditions and interaction patterns generating more or less closeness

and the extent to which social norms and commitments in adulthood contribute to the development, maintenance, or deterioration of closeness are important empirical questions that need to be addressed. A further consideration is the context in which the data were collected--i. e., the extent to which norms of institutions and small group settings influence the expression of feelings and experiences.

Dynamics Originating and Maintaining Closeness

The content analysis of the group interaction transcripts yielded a variety of variables--values, commitments, psychological characteristics, events, and behaviors--which contribute to the origins and maintenance of closeness. Some of these variables recurred with great regularity. Others were less frequent but equally clear. Some were infrequent but highly salient.

Perceived Origins of Closeness. The variables perceived as originating closeness among siblings validate the major life-span pattern found: closeness to siblings develops originally within the framework of the family when the siblings are young. Sharing of experiences, activities, values and interests during childhood and adolescence proved to be powerful determinants of feelings of closeness. Experiences shared as members of close families, or as members of subsets of a family (e. g., the "older" or "little" kids) in play, recreation, and even work, set the stage for the life patterns. Sharing bedrooms, daily walks to school, and other activities in close physical proximity contributed to closeness. Especially when the family lived in a

relatively isolated geographical location, closeness to siblings and certainly to the family as a unit was enhanced as siblings had to rely on each other for play and work. Age spacing was crucially important here--siblings closer in age spent more time together and consequently often felt closer than sib lings who were further apart in years. However, siblings far apart could take on surrogate parent roles and develop closeness, albeit of a different kind.

These factors remained important in adolescence, undoubtedly reflecting the fact that siblings were still living at home. At this time, shared personal values, interests, school and church activities, and the consequences of critical incidents illustrate the growing differentiation of sibling personalities and the formation of relationships based on them. Adolescence and early adulthood presented a time when closeness between pairs of siblings grew considerably (c. f., Cicirelli, 1979; Rosenberg, 1980). A good deal of teaching and modeling took place at this time, most of it cross-sex. Especially older brothers were seen as models of developing competence and achievements. Some were related to as peers in social situations when they took their younger sisters along to social events. The brothers' friends became convenient dates. Some siblings became good friends at this time, growing into their respective adult roles with each others' help.

Perceived Maintenance of Closeness. Once siblings left home to establish professional lives and families of their own, the most important factor in the maintenance of closeness was, without doubt, the foundation laid in childhood. Many of the experiences recounted as originating closeness among children became cherished memories which maintained closeness in later years.

Similarly, family values which were seen as originating closeness in childhood were later perceived as shared personal values which continued closeness in adulthood.

Individual commitments to uphold family values, traditions, and rituals focussed closeness on a personal level. Such commitments were expressed in activities representing investments of time, energy, and money. Activities ranged from fixing faucets to giving financial advice, to acting as confidant and even therapist, to taking care of each other in adversity.

Family histories served as themes around which memories could be shared, and family rituals--reunions at designated times as well as special occasions--provided opportunities for further common experiences and for integrating the siblings' family members into the original clan. In addition, writing and calling were frequent, as was visiting between individual brothers and sisters.

Not surprisingly, decreasing feelings of closeness were frequently explained by geographical distance and the ensuing lack of contact. If this happens during childhood, either as the result of large age differences between siblings or unusual circumstances, feelings of closeness may never develop. Another reason for lack of closeness between siblings are jealousies and rivalries, often originated by parental favoritism in childhood and continued by parents and children in adulthood (Ross & Milgram, 1980). Also influencing closeness are differences in life styles, personal interests, and religious preferences, especially if these are central values.

Perceptions of Closeness in Old Age

Memories are crucial. The value participants assigned to recollections of

family and sibling closeness and the factors influencing their origins and maintenance attest to their salience in old age. If the memories are descriptive of actual events, or if perceptual shifts accommodated needs and desires along the way, is ultimately irrelevant. It is the elderly persons' perceptions at this late age which affect the quality of their lives.

Sharing childhood values and experiences played a major role in feelings of closeness between siblings. It was as if sharing these memories reactivated feelings of closeness and belongingness to the whole family. Is a developmental task addressed here? Romaniuk & Romaniuk (1980), in reviewing studies on recollections of past experiences during the later periods of life found that reminiscing may trigger recall of past events which deal with such issues as evaluating the meaning of life and one's own existence, or focussing attention on aspects of one's personality with which one is not satisfied. In this study, experiences originating closeness among the participants and their siblings as children certainly became memories which were a source of comfort, pride, and even serenity: one had lived life according to one's family's and personal values--with integrity. The only event perceived as superior as an accomplishment was reestablishing closeness with a sibling after it had deteriorated earlier in life. Alternatively, perhaps the most anguished feelings reported were the result of having lost existing feelings of closeness to a favorite sibling through what sounded like betrayals: violations of expectations based on interpersonal histories and family traditions and values. Is the realization of having lived up to one's own and one's family beliefs and standards a way of putting one's life

in order? Is not having done so cause for despair and fear of not being able to do so?

A second major aspect of closeness is descriptive of support networks and intimacy. It includes positive feelings between brothers and sisters, supportive interactions, and frequent contact. All three themes are natural outgrowths of family and personal values and interaction histories eminating from them.

Communications between almost all siblings still living were regular and frequent. Remaining in contact, a highly valued activity throughout their lives, took on special meaning for these participants as they grew old. For many, it became a ritual in its own right. Physical proximity remained important, but in a different sense than it had been earlier in life. For these elderly persons it seemed to be defined by whatever distance self or sibling was able to travel to visit the other. Through the middle years, lack of proximity can be substituted for by regular family get-togethers. Late in life, the elderly are often no longer able to attend such reunions. And the reunions themselves have changed so much in composition, being now primarily attended by the elderly's children and grandchildren, that their relevance is no longer the same. Hence, visits between brothers and sisters take on added importance. Writing and calling were also frequent. Contact was facilitated by creative writing arrangements and telephone networks. Siblings forwarded each others' letters in round-robin fashion so that all could know how brothers and sisters felt. Or they obtained their knowledge from a pivotal person who acted as a clearing house, informing all of each others' well-being and state of affairs. Some participants mentioned that one or more of

their siblings were no longer able to write, speak, or even read, but certainly many thoughts were directed toward them. It seemed as if these elderly persons maintained symbolic contact with their siblings even through memories and caring which they could no longer express to each other.

Being in frequent communication with each other enabled siblings to know when one of them needed assistance. To the extent that they were physically and mentally able, and at times drawing on younger family members, participants gave and received physical help, counseled and advised each other, and in some cases of special need became temporarily responsible for each other. Such interactions were reciprocally cause and effect of trusting, respecting, and liking brothers and sisters to whom participants felt close. In some of these cases intimacy was acknowledged. Two women referred to their sisters as soul-mates, five spoke of having confidants among their brothers and sisters, and seven were friends with at least one sibling. More intimacy seemed to be inherent in their sibling interactions than this group was willing to acknowledge, however. If such lack of acknowledgement can be ascribed to generational preferences, disengagement in process, the Protestant ethics of many of the participants, or a combination of these and other factors is an empirical question.

What emerges from these perceptions of closeness is a reciprocally reinforcing system of family unity and a strong sense of kinship. The values and interaction patterns of the parents are internalized as siblings grow up.

During adulthood values and interaction patterns exist as shared personal values and interpersonal expectations for certain kinds of behavior. In old age, looking back on a life lived in harmony with values and siblings provides a sense of personal integrity and the security of having earned a rightful place in the family. This sense of belonging may be partially symbolic as it includes family members who are no longer alive. It is also very real and demonstrated in the support and communication networks existing among the remaining siblings.

Conclusion

As explored in this study, the concept of closeness in the sibling relationships of the elderly proved to be multidimensional. Social interactions representing support networks and, to a lesser degree, intimacy, contributed to a sense of closeness between siblings. Social, psychological, and physical aspects were clearly evident, satisfying a number of criteria suggested as minimally necessary for a definition of interpersonal closeness by Levinger and Raush (1977). Beyond that, it appears that closeness in sibling relationships of the elderly may well contain a further dimension having to do with perceptual validation.

Schulz & Hanusa (1980) suggest the beginnings of an explanation for the special contribution of sibling networks, particularly with respect to possible perceptual validation functions. Applying attributional analyses of learned helplessness as formulated by Abramson et al (1978) to the life situations of

the elderly, these researchers concluded that control over and predictability of events in one's life have a positive impact on an older person's well-being. Conversely, if aging labels carrying the stereotypes this society holds about its elderly lead to a decline in self-esteem and control over their lives (Rodin & Langer, 1980), social contact which validates the elderly's perceptions of self and reality should be beneficial. Who could be better qualified to provide such validation than siblings to whom one has been close throughout life, and who grew up within the same social milieu?

The results of this and other studies (summarized by Cicirelli, 1979) indicate that sibling relationships, in general, are among the most stable of all interpersonal relationships. Neither do they require continual validation as friendships and spouse bonds do (Clark & Anderson, 1967; Ross & Dalton, 1980). As elderly siblings have had a lifetime to get to know each others' personalities and habits, the relationships should also be predictable. Adding to these personal-interactive factors, as shown clearly by the subjects in this study, siblings function within the framework of common family values and interaction patterns which lend further stability and predictablity to such relationships. Thus, it appears that closeness in sibling relationships may help the elderly to maintain their adjustment by serving social network and intimacy functions. Furthermore, siblings, more than anyone else, are in a unique position to affirm and validate each others' perceptions of self and a reality which may well appear strange to younger persons who grew up in a vastly changed world.

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Table 1: Age, Sex, Number of Siblings, and Educational Level of Participants

Variable	Frequency
Age	
55 - 61	4
62 - 69	4
70 - 79	14
80 - 89	7
90 +	1
Total	30
Sex	
Male	7
Female	23
Total	30
Number of Siblings	
1	5
2 - 3	8
4 - 5	7
6 - 9	7
10 - 17	3
Total	30
Educational Level	
Less than high school diploma	2
High school diploma	5
One to 3 years of college	6
Bachelor's Degree	7
Masters	5
Ph. D.	5
Total	30

Table 2: Perceived Patterns of Closeness to Family

Variable	Frequency
Family has always been close	17
Family has never been close	3
Family closeness changed over time	5
Total	25*

* Five of the participants did not commit themselves to a pattern of family closeness

Table 3: Perceived Patterns of Closeness to Siblings

Variable	Frequency
Life-Time Closeness Patterns	
Sibling has always been close	
reported by female	10
reported by male	3
Sibling has never been close	
reported by female	5
reported by male	1
Closeness Changes Throughout Life	
Closeness increased over time	
to brother, reported by sister	14
to sister, reported by sister	6
to sister, reported by brother	3
to brother, reported by brother	1
Closeness decreased over time	
to brother, reported by sister	0
to sister, reported by sister	3
to sister, reported by brother	1
to brother, reported by brother	1